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Intelligence Report

No. 7996

April 9, 1959

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THE UK GOVERNMENT POSITION
ON THE BERLIN SITUATION*

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Abstract

The British are determined to exploit every opportunity to press for a summit conference on the Berlin crisis, since they believe that a satisfactory solution can be reached only at that level. They have no illusions that such a meeting will reduce all, or even most, of the East-West tensions, but the imperatives of UK public opinion require that the West make every effort to approach the forthcoming conference pragmatically and not appear intransigent. [More openly than other Western European powers] the UK considers reunification no longer a practical possibility and the Berlin issue to be separable from an all-Germany solution as well as from the broader problem of European security. As for the immediate problem, the British see the possibility of exchanging de facto recognition of East Germany in return for a reaffirmation of Western rights in Berlin. As a first step towards a broader detente, they see the possibility of establishing a controlled and inspected "limited forces" zone in Central Europe. [The other major Western European powers, whom the British consider "too doctrinaire," consider the UK "soft" on these tactical proposals.] The UK is, however, firm in its strategic commitments. It has reiterated its opposition to the abandonment of West Berlin, its opposition to a neutral Germany or the pulling apart of forces in Germany, and its opposition to the unbalancing of East-West forces. [Fully cognizant that their maneuverability is limited, furthermore, the British are not likely to engage in any further initiatives that will weaken the Western position in general or their "interdependent" relationship with the US in particular.]

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* Related Intelligence Reports No. 7994 and No. 7995, dated April 8, 1959, discuss the positions of France and of the Federal Republic of Germany.

THIS IS AN INTELLIGENCE REPORT AND NOT A STATEMENT OF DEPARTMENTAL POLICY

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Introduction

The UK position in the Berlin crisis must be considered in the context of that country's long-standing desire for a detente with the USSR and a demonstration of Western political initiative in resolving the dangers of a divided Germany. "Summitry" and "flexibility," furthermore, derive fundamentally from the profound fear felt by the British public of a nuclear war. These factors have only intensified the traditionally pragmatic approach that has long characterized the UK's diplomatic relations. Although stimulated by the campaign fever of the forthcoming General Election, British eagerness to go to the summit does not stem basically from electoral pressures but will continue to be an essential element in UK foreign relations. A 5

Essentials of the British Position

Status quo. The UK found the status quo -- i.e., a divided Germany and a Berlin enclave within the GDR -- a workable, albeit vulnerable, arrangement, and would be satisfied if this situation could be continued. It also appealed to an underlying prejudice in Britain that a strong Germany has historically proved to be the trouble maker of Europe. While the division of Berlin was an awkward arrangement, it was also a useful "showcase" and intelligence outpost in a Soviet satellite. 2

It is unlikely, however, that the British ever believed that this situation could continue indefinitely, or that they now believe the pre-November 10 status quo can be restored. The British recognize that the long and the short term goals of the USSR are to weaken the Western alliance by every conceivable tactic, and that their Berlin gambit has struck at one of the West's weakest positions. Convinced, however, that the Soviets intend to exploit the vulnerability in this salient, and estimating that this is a potentially explosive issue, the UK is inclined to accommodate itself to the political "facts of life" in Central Europe. The leadership of both parties has drawn encouragement from Soviet statements that Moscow is ready to negotiate, and they believe that every effort must be made to wring concessions that will save West Berlin and Western face.

In a broader sense, the UK sees in the present crisis an opportunity to alter the status quo in Europe by enabling the West to formulate a more positive foreign policy than they believe has been advanced since 1955. In the absence of Secretary Dulles both the British Government and British public see the Berlin problem as an opportunity to fill a vacuum in Western leadership and thereby to enhance their sense of self-esteem. They have no illusions about the difficulties of bridging the gap between the Western powers and the Soviet Union, but they are ready to engage in protracted discussions and negotiations toward this end. If there is no detente, and lack of success is the result of Soviet rather than Western intransigence, they see the effort itself as a victory for Western initiative. 15

Berlin. The British see the German issue as two separable problems: 1) the immediate status of West Berlin and the imminent threat of transfer of ~~access~~ ^{access} controls to the GDR, and 2) the broader German question, including questions of reunification, security zones, etc. The British consider the Berlin problem negotiable, on an interim basis at least, but they recognize that the West may have to pay a price of de facto recognition that may compromise an overall German settlement. They are less optimistic as to the negotiability of the broader German question. They have little expectation that the Western formula of "reunification by free elections" will be acceptable to the Soviets in the foreseeable future, and will resist the inclusion of this formula in any Western proposals except as a long-range objective.

More specifically in regard to Berlin, British thinking has not changed since November when the crisis crystallized. The abandonment of West Berlin to East Germany is in the foreseeable future out of the question. They are still certain that the USSR will eventually transfer access controls to the GDR unless East-West negotiations are under way. Once control is transferred, and assuming the West's inability to supply Berlin by airlift for more than a year, the British see the West confronted with the alternatives of dealing with GDR authorities or using force to break a blockade. As between these, the British Foreign Office has said that "it would seem clearly to be in our interest to choose the first...." They recognized that this might put the West on a "slippery slope" leading to the alternatives of full and formal recognition of the GDR or a blockade that would have to be broken by force, but again the Foreign Office considers the recognition of the GDR the lesser evil. Lloyd has attempted to dispel the illusion that the British "welcome" recognition of the GDR, and he has reiterated the unwillingness of the UK to go against the wishes of the Federal Republic. He has indicated, however, that the Federal Republic must recognize that the West might be obliged to submit to de facto recognition, and doubts furthermore that de facto recognition will necessarily lead to the removal of the West from West Berlin.

In return for de facto recognition, the British believe that they can exact from the Soviets a reaffirmation of Western rights in Berlin. They welcomed Soviet statements that the "free city" proposals are amenable and that an interim solution in Berlin is feasible. Essentially, de facto recognition would be tied into the "agent" theory in that the GDR would function, not as a government in its own right, but as the designated authority of the USSR. The USSR in return would assure that its obligations to keep open the Berlin corridor would continue.

Should it not be possible to effect such an agreement with the Soviets, the British would have the West "get off the hook" by recourse to the UN. They believe that world opinion can be mobilized in support of the West if the matter goes to the Security Council, and that an interim solution might be effected by providing a UN presence in Berlin.

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Such a presence, however, could not conceivably displace Western forces in the city. There is virtual unanimity in the UK on the retention of Western forces in Berlin as a symbol of Western strength vis-a-vis the Soviets, as well as to uphold the integrity of West Berlin, Western Europeans, and all countries identified with the Western Alliance.

Contingency Planning. The British position on this matter rests on the conviction that nothing should be done by the West that would appear to be provocative, or that might spark off military hostilities without satisfying public opinion within the NATO countries that the Soviets made the first use of force. In principle the British have agreed to military preparedness measures, possibly including a NATO general alert, but they have reserved their right of final review before any contingency plan is implemented. Should surface traffic be interrupted, the British still seem reluctant to test Soviet intentions by ground action where it is difficult to determine clearly who has been the aggressor. At the outside, they hope that any ground test would be limited to an "access probe" rather than a "military action."

More to their liking, if the West must make an effort to run a blockade, would be a garrison airlift which would be more difficult to obstruct without overt use of force on the part of the Soviets or the East Germans. This latter situation, the British feel, would more likely elicit NATO and popular support for a Western response that might involve the risk of general war.

Notwithstanding the appearance of "softness" in this British position, it is likely, as Embassy London has observed, that "when the chips are down," both the British public and British government would show determination and firmness. The key to the British position is the need on the part of the leadership not to get too far away from public opinion and to find itself in a position where the US government is urging the use of force while the British public is either split or negative on this issue. British public opinion, however, may be expected to harden if the Soviets take a "tough" line in forthcoming negotiations.]

Reunification of Germany. The British still maintain their "declared policy" that Germany is to be reunified by free elections. There is, however, probably no British leader who considers such a solution feasible in the foreseeable future. Macmillan, and the Labor opposition, welcomed Secretary Dulles' observation that free elections need not necessarily initiate the reunification process. [Quite aside from their own doubts about the desirability of a united Germany,] the British are convinced that the Soviet Union will maintain the division of Europe and that East Germany is increasingly becoming an integral part of the Soviet bloc. They do not even believe that a confederation or economic union between the East and West zones is possible until there can be Four Power agreement on an all-German settlement. So long as the present deadlock continues, the British believe that relations between the

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two zones can be improved la technical and professional contacts. They ~~even doubt~~ the ~~request~~ contribution to "reunification" is likely to be ~~until~~ more liberal conditions are achieved in East Germany improves to such an extent that the Ulbricht regime would not be likely to suffer in prestige from greater contact with the Federal Republic.

In the British view, therefore, Western proposals for reunification are to be advanced as maximum objectives, and largely for their propaganda effect. They fully recognize that there must be fall-back positions, and that these come close to involving the West in de facto and ultimately de jure recognition of "two Germanies."

Limitation of Forces and Disengagement. The British have been waging a strenuous campaign to clarify widespread misunderstanding as to the differences between disengagement and limitation of forces, and their view of which concept best suits the present crisis. This confusion of terms reached a climax with the release of the Anglo-Soviet communique of March 3rd which discussed "the possibilities of increasing security by some method of limitation of forces and weapons, both conventional and nuclear, in an agreed area of Europe, coupled with an appropriate system of inspection." Much to the displeasure of Macmillan this statement was characterized in many Western capitals as a disengagement proposal. The British maintain that disengagement specifically means the separation of the main land forces of the East and West by the establishment of an area which is demilitarized, occupied by indigenous forces alone, or denuclearized. They agree with critics of "full" disengagement that the creation of such a neutral belt invites rather than avoids substantial risks of war. Limitation of forces, as they have advanced the concept, means either fixing the total of forces and armaments without regard to nationality, or their reduction to agreed ceilings without regard to nationality on some basis of parity. It would not involve the withdrawal of any particular forces (including foreign forces), nor the exclusion of particular (i.e. nuclear) weapons. They insist that the idea is not new, that it was part of the Western proposal at Geneva in October 1955, and reiterated by Selwyn Lloyd during the foreign affairs debate in Parliament on December 4, 1958. Even Hugh Gaitskell, commonly associated with a neutral belt proposal, considers that a limitation of forces plan is the best that can be considered at the present time.

The UK sees such a proposal as having several principal advantages: (1) it would bring about a lowering of tensions between the two German territories that might gradually lead toward reunification; and (2) it might prove a useful experiment in international control which if successful could be extended to other fields. The British also feel that such an agreement would not necessarily confirm the division of Germany as some critics fear, since the areas could be described without reference to the line dividing East and West Germany.

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East Germany, albeit dangerous, seems to the UK to be dictated by the realities of the situation. The British could hardly, however, for the reaffirmation of the Allied position in West Berlin, as well as a sign of progress towards a "security zone" in Central Europe.

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While the British appear to be soft on tactics, their position is essentially hardened by the fact that they cannot solve the Berlin issue bilaterally and that their area of maneuver is very narrow. Macmillan's latest trip to the Western capitals demonstrated the diverse approaches to a Berlin solution, as well as the prevalent suspicion of the British role in this issue. He has been obliged to defend his present views in Bonn, Paris, and Washington and to remind his allies that if the UK was "soft" in 1938 it was not soft in 1939-41. Macmillan recognizes that there can be no solution that does not take full cognizance of West German and US views, if only because the latter are the principal elements in the military defense of Western Europe. He and Selwyn Lloyd have reiterated their opposition to the abandonment of West Berlin, the establishment of a neutral Germany and the pulling apart of forces within Central Europe, as well as their opposition to the unbalancing of East-West forces. The Labor Party, sometimes shrill in its demands for greater independence from US leadership, would itself be obliged toward a much more moderate position if it came to power. For all of the pressures, therefore, for flexibility, realism, and detente, the British may be expected to back away from any independent proposals or actions that will weaken the Western position in general, or their "interdependent" relationship with the US in particular.

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